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ABSTRACT

Sectarian interpretation of presumption is a major problem facing the teacher of the Bible as literature. Students should be made aware of the pitfalls of interpreting the text from a theological point of view, including "over interpretation" or adding details to scripture, a reliance on poetic license, and an unfamiliarity with basic Biblical terminology. Four levels of reading--literal, figurative, allegorical, and typological--can be exemplified by several scripture passages, and the notion of the Bible as propaganda can be discussed. (AEA)

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The Bible as Literature: Coping with Sectarian Interpretations

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I'll bet you can't name the person who played for the New York Knicks, Rangers, and Jets--and all in the same season. The answer is Gladys Gooding, who played the organ for all three teams. Caught you, eh? You made the natural association of "playing" with sports, rather than with anything else, much less a musical instrument. Had this question been asked from the musical angle, you probably would have made the mistake in reverse, assuming that "playing" had nothing to do with sports. Here lurks a major problem facing the teacher of the Bible as literature: presumption.

Dealing with presumption, especially when it's rooted in strong theological soil, can be frustrating and disappointing. But following a few suggestions can make it far less so. I've found that while presumption, or sectarian interpretations, can't always be eliminated, they can be effectively controlled--if the instructor is prepared to deal with them.

For example, in my class, immediately after introducing myself and providing the students with all of the usual information concerning office hours, books, and so on, I make an announcement that goes something like this:

> Because this is a class in the literature of the Bible, we must take great care to avoid interpreting the literature from a theological point of view--unless we can back up that interpretation by direct reference to the text. The text must remain our authority.

So far in my career, no students have taken issue with this; they seem to feel it is fair and sensible. Once they fully realize that authority lies not with instructor or student but with the source itself, they tend to read scripture more carefully, paying closer attention to what it says, not what they think it says.

Yet believing that the text is going to definitively eliminate all questions of interpretations is too much to hope for. One of the great critics of this century found that out in his famous study Practical Criticism. Those who know this central work recall what I.A. Richards describes as perhaps the most pervasive malady of average-to-good readers of literature: they often fail to make plain prose sense out of a literary statement. As a result, reading a text accurately becomes a difficult enterprise for many.

This can be demonstrated by reading to students Luke 16. 1-9, the parable of the cunning steward, as it is usually called. Jesus states:

> The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.
>
> Revised Standard Version

Trying to reconcile what Jesus says in this parable with what he says in others is exasperating--at least without twisting the text. Pointing out how easily this twisting can occur to fit presumption helps students avoid it in future.

Even when this tendency to twist is avoided though, other textual problems exist which cause sectarian interpretations.

One of the most frequent is what I call "over interpretation," adding details to scripture. That the Bible contains relatively little detail was first pointed out by Erich Auerbach in Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature. He distinguishes between the two main literary epic traditions in the western world, Homeric and Biblical. Homer's technique was to describe action vividly, to leave very little to the imagination. When one of the heroes of the Trojan War dies in battle, the reader graphically sees that death. Swords cleave through helmet, head, and torso; spears plunge through tender necks, but not always through windpipes. Homer leaves little room for misinterpretation.

But Biblical narrative, with little attention to detail, and often less to time and space, leaves an important portion of the text unexpressed. While this provides dramatic intensity and creates depth of characterization, it can contribute greatly to sectarian interpretation because of over interpretation. Consider this:

> And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son.
>
> And the Angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me.
> Genesis 22. 9-12, King James Version

Students can examine this passage closely to try to determine

What is going on, in the detailed sense of that word. The instructor might indeed ask them to verbally describe how Abraham looks as he is about to sacrifice Isaac. After all, the Bible doesn't provide much detail. Does he look determined? Mad? Depressed? Compassionate? After discussing possibilities--and the problem of over interpretation--show them some artistic renditions of the scene, those by Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Caravaggio, and Rembrandt, to demonstrate how differently great artists depict the same scriptural passage. It is especially interesting and profitable to ask students to try to determine how much "license" each of the artists took; then you might want to go a step further. Ask them if they believe an artist should be entitled to more license than should a student of literature.

The entire subject of poetic license can be dealt with in a related way as well, by discussing "level of reading." These are, of course, (1) literal, (2) figurative, (3) allegorical, and (4) typological. The first can be exemplified by thousands of scriptural possibilities, any that are free of imagery. The second, too, is easy to exemplify, since the Bible is replete with lines like "I am the vine, you are the branches." (John 15. 15) It doesn't take students much effort to see the difference between literal and figurative, and to see that both can be interpreted without great textual disagreement, as long as the interpretation of the figurative is confined to its imagistic pattern. What occasionally happens in my classes, at any rate, is that some students want to

immediately take the figurative a step further, short-circuiting the imagery and plugging the statement into something theological. For example, one might say, "Well, the vine obviously stands for Christ. And since Christ, God, and the Holy Ghost are all One, the vine symbolizes that." When this happens, chances are excellent another student will immediately leap in to point out that the conclusion can't stand based on what the figurative language itself says. In case a student doesn't do this, of course, the instructor must.

With the third level, allegory, a brief explanation of the "allegorical" elements of a Biblical book like the Song of Solomon works quite well. Two or three excerpts from this work of sensual poetry should suffice. After reading them, make mention that the love between the king and girl stands, according to a popular Hebrew reading, for the marriage between Yahweh and Israel. You can also mention that a Christian view of the Song of Solomon renders the marriage as that between Christ and the church. Then ask the students to what extent the text supports either of those readings.

Further from firm textual ground is the fourth level, typology. The apostle Paul considered the Red Sea episode in Exodus to be a prefiguration of Christian baptism. Martin Luther thought of the man wrestling Jacob as the pre-existent Christ. Needless to say, the instructor should never attempt to refute typological interpretations, nor allegorical either. A reminder about the limitations of such interpretations should suffice.

The following verses from the book of Isaiah can be read to students before examining sections of scripture especially subject to typological interpretation:

> Who has believed what we have heard?
> And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
> For he grew up before him like a young plant,
> And like a root out of dry ground;
> He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,
> And no beauty that we should desire him.
> He was despised and rejected by men;
> A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
> And as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised,
> And we esteemed him not.
>
> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
> Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
> But he was wounded for our transgressions,
> He was bruised for our iniquities;
> Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
> And with his stripes we are healed.
> Isaiah 53. 1-5, Revised Standard Version

The temptation is great to assume that this famous chapter, often called the Song of the Suffering Servant, is clearly in reference to the sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of man. However, letting students examine it carefully and with attention to discovering exactly what the text says should prove this point: while typological interpretation is plausible from a theological point of view, the text doesn't offer sufficient evidence to make it certain.

It is possible, naturally, that some students will refuse to be this "literary" about typological interpretation. These same students may balk, too, when the instructor discusses the Bible as propaganda. Yet clearly propaganda plays an important role in scripture. After all, the Bible was written by Hebrews and Christians to serve as sacred document. Why shouldn't it be tendentious?

Nevertheless, students can react negatively to this. I discuss it in my college classes by offering obvious examples, like this one:

> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.
>
> John 20. 30-1, Revised Standard Version

Similar examples abound in the New Testament. The Pauline letters, for example, are filled with passages that lend themselves to fruitful discussions on the subject of propaganda. Students should be reminded that simply because a work is propagandistic doesn't make it less valuable as a literary document. The instructor might want to point out other great works of literature, like the Divine Comedy, that are replete with propaganda.

Unfamiliarity with basic terminology can also lead to misinterpretation, or sectarian interpretations. Students often come into my classes ignorant of some profound differences, like the one between "monolatry" and "monotheism." They must realize that the early Hebrews were monolatrists, not monotheists. This can be pointed out to them in numerous passages of the Bible, perhaps the most dramatic being the first of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shall have none other gods before me." It comes as a surprise to many students to learn that the early Hebrews believed in many gods, though were supposed to worship only Yahweh.

Fully understanding Biblical terminology is essential when studying the Pauline letters. Students find themselves arguing

non-productively and at great length over the meaning of such terms as "sanctification" and "reconciliation." A good way to avoid this is to settle on the meaning of terms like these before reading any of the Pauline letters. The instructor can find a number of editions of the Bible that provide definitions for terms like the above.

Finally, I recommend something that effective teachers seem to practice most of the time anyway: affability. When an instructor is warm and polite, students often are as well, even those who otherwise might brandish their sectarian interpretations continually.